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ABSTRACT

New voices and perspectives from an increasingly diverse student body challenge educators to reconsider customary ways of seeing and doing the business of teaching writing. This challenge led researchers at Rhode Island College to create an informal writers' group with peers rather than instructors as facilitators. Writers' Informal Network (WIN) began with an informal group of six, all women; they ranged in age from early twenties to middle forties. Along with the writing center directors, the student facilitators, an undergraduate English major, and a graduate student in social work, reflect on the development they witnessed in one student in particular, a 28-year-old returning student with learning disabilities. Through a series of sketches and poems, the graduate facilitator observes in the writing student a realization that her story is something that has happened "to" her, not something that "is" her. Writing filters out the speaker's own negative judgments, her feelings of uniqueness and isolation. The undergraduate facilitator observes that the writing student has discovered she has a voice, that putting words on the page is only the beginning, not the end, and that the process of revision is ongoing. She has moved from journal writing with an audience of one, to writing for a supportive group, to writing for a public audience. (TB)

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A steadily increasing proportion of students are coming to colleges from diverse backgrounds and life situations. These students often have difficulty negotiating cultural, situational, language, and institutional barriers. This difficulty is reflected in students' writing and is exacerbated by educators who respond in intimidating ways that shut novice writers out of the academic conversation rather than inviting them in. Such practices put electric fences around already existing institutional barriers to learning, and students are further marginalized. Writing becomes a daunting experience rather than a mode of learning, and students lose confidence in themselves as writers, yet another reason to perceive academia as inhospitable foreign territory.

Diverse students are expected to take their place in the academic conversation, but has a place been set? Students are expected to express themselves, but has anyone communicated that they will be heard, that different voices are welcome voices? Their writing challenges educators to reconsider customary ways of seeing and doing the business of teaching writing. This challenge led the researchers to create an informal writers' group with peers rather than instructors as facilitators. This group is constructed as an "as if" academic space, a "play frame" in which participants can experiment with writing without the negative consequences usually associated with breaking conventions. Conditions for play such as safety, acceptance and humor prevail, and the sense of play facilitates learning. Such a context resembles a traditional rite

of passage in which participants try on new behaviors before permanently adopting new roles in the culture.

Through writing, these group members become actors in their stories rather than those who have been acted upon. As their writing is shared and responded to with interest and support, the members move into new ways of seeing themselves and their stories. The emotional, cultural, situational, language, and institutional barriers to writing begin to crumble. Unspeakable narratives of ridicule, rape, suicide, mental illness, and rejection are spoken and become the occasion for celebration of resilience and deepening connections among group members.

As with many transition rituals, the direction this group would take was unknown. We are discovering, however, that informal writers' groups facilitated by peer tutors can create a liminal space in which differences are welcomed and celebrated, and in which marginalized students whose voices have been silenced or disregarded are listened to. Diverse students who were uncomfortable with the medium of writing have entered the realm of play and are feeling the freedom to experiment. Consequently, they are beginning to think of themselves as players who have a voice worth listening to in the academic conversation.

THE WRITING CENTER PERSPECTIVE: SOME HISTORY

Margaret Carroll

The project began innocently enough. There I was, a believer

in collaboration, a devotee of Paulo Freire, an apostle of social constructionism. After five years of working in the Writing Center, I seemed closer to my goal of becoming a facilitator instead of a director. Tutor training had become the responsibility of all of us, with experienced tutors frequently choosing the readings/topics for the formal course, tutor journals determining the content of staff meetings, and tutoring sessions based upon negotiating the authority of the writer, tutor, and absent instructor. Although not always as ideal as one would wish (after all collaboration is a messy business), our attempt to put theory into daily, lived practice was paying off in both a more energized staff and an increase in Writing Center appointments.

We decided to take the next steps. The collaboration in the Center had proved very powerful, but in order to fully implement that power, we needed to make closer connections with faculty. Consequently, in addition to offering classroom presentations by the tutors, I increased my networking activities with my colleagues through individual contacts and by the establishment, under the auspices of the Dean of Arts and Sciences, of the Writing Center Advisory Committee comprised of a dozen faculty members from various disciplines. In the course of all of this activity, I was asked to meet with the faculty of the graduate school of Social Work to discuss ways in which they could get their students to write more effectively.

Margaret Waller, then a new assistant professor in the Masters in Social Work program, was particularly intrigued with what I had to say. Her interest proved to be the basis for some of the most fruitful work the Writing Center has ever undertaken. Initially, we collaborated to make the introductory course in the Masters program not only more writing intensive, but more of an invitation to the field of social work. Waller's assignments were designed to give students hands-on experience with the texture, tone, and feel of the language of social work. She readily understood the distinctions between writing designed to help the student learn, and writing which is meant to test what a student knows. She employed journals, designed to encourage students to explore whatever issues (personal or otherwise) interested them; reflections, which required students to discuss in one page an issue from their reading (designed to introduce students not only to some of the issues in the field, but to the kind of succinct writing which will be required of them as professionals); and formal papers designed to assess what the students have learned.

Her interest in social constructionist theory was mirrored in her use of "reflection teams," peer groups who responded to individual reflection papers, and in her decision to keep copies of successful formal papers in the Writing Center so that her students could have models to study. The collaborative effort also included the tutors. Waller provided them with her assignments, examples of the kind of writing she expected, and offered her time

at tutor meetings not only to discuss her course, but to address tutor concerns about helping students who seemed to have some personal issues which interfered with their writing.

The stage was almost set. Just after my initial work with Waller, the English Department hired Marjorie Roemer as Director of Composition. Roemer had worked with the National Writing Project, had initiated a portfolio assessment program at Cincinnati, and, key to our work, was fascinated by all aspects of collaboration. What Roemer brought to this project was an interest in Anne Ruggles Gere's articulation of the "extracurriculum," the power of writing groups outside of classrooms. I introduced her to Waller, and a series of weekly lunch and brainstorming sessions ensued - fertile ground for new projects.

Out of this series of meetings came the inception of WIN, the Writers' Informal Network. In keeping with Waller's ideas of play and our Writing Center's philosophy, WIN was designed as a non-hierarchical group; it would be about sharing authority. We began with a pilot project of six interested students, all women. Some had been recruited from basic writing classes, some were already coming to the Writing Center, some were brought to the group by their friends. They ranged in age from the early twenties to the middle forties; some were single, some married; several were parents. They were of diverse ethnicities. The group was co-

facilitated by Terry Smith, a secondary education/English major and an experienced writing tutor, and Pauline Santos, a candidate for the Masters in Social Work degree who was also trained as a writing tutor.

In late August of 1994, the group began meeting once a week. With the members' consent, we taped each meeting and saved every scrap of writing. The two tutors and the three faculty researchers met once a month (and later once a week) for breakfast to talk about the project and how it was developing. Once a week each of the tutors met with her supervisor: Smith with Carroll, Santos with both Carroll and Waller.

Perhaps the best way to represent the work of this group is through the individual voices of some of its participants. The following selections represent the facilitators' differing insights into the growth of one writer.

VOICES FROM THE GROUP

Empowerment Through Writing

Pauline Santos

Jackie is a 28-year-old returning student who was turned off to academics at the more traditional college age. She had a difficult childhood with a mostly absent alcoholic father and with

a mother who is mentally ill. She was married and divorced within a two-year period. Jackie is a lesbian. She has just been diagnosed as having a language-based learning disability and Attention Deficit Disorder. Jackie has been oppressed and discriminated against as a student, as a woman, and as a lesbian.

At our second WIN meeting back in early September, Jackie read her first writing for the group. When she was done, we talked about the piece. One member's comment was that Jackie had a strong voice," to which Jackie responded:

> I guess I'm amazed or shocked
> to hear I have a voice.

Most victims of oppression and discrimination have had their voices silenced. Through this silence, we unwittingly take on the roles assigned to us -- as if at birth, along with a birth certificate, we are handed a script. We come to expect and accept the menial roles we are allowed as extras and walk-ons. For many of us, WIN has given us our first speaking lines, and we have discovered or rediscovered our voices.

At our third meeting, we asked members to keep their rough drafts for research purposes. Jackie said:

> I don't do rough drafts -- this happens

only once in a lifetime for me.

To victims of oppression and discrimination, the concept of self-initiated change (or drafting and redrafting as the writer in me thinks of it) is a foreign one. Most perceive themselves as powerless in their day-to-day interactions with their environment. Change is not seen as something they can or even should cause to happen, but, rather, as something that happens to them -- something to be lived through and coped with, rather than something which can be initiated and guided.

It is not surprising, then, that they approach writing in the same way. They believe they cannot write, or they believe their story is of no interest to anyone, or they believe their story is especially horrific, or they believe that once you write something down, you have to live with it.

At our fifth meeting, Jackie's piece was about the WIN group itself. She wrote:

> I've been very comfortable here. I totally look forward to Thursday nights to come here and be able to express even a little bit of what I go through during the week. I feel comfortable writing it down and bringing it here to share.

Jackie's comfort in bringing her story to our WIN group is significant. As all of us know, it is not easy to tell the truth when the truth is unspeakable. Writing allows the writer to tell the truth without speaking it. As writings are shared in our WIN group, these truths are eventually spoken and sometimes cried. But writing them first facilitates the telling.

Writing is voice. When that voice is met with unconditional acceptance, it is echoed back to the "speaker." The echo filters out some of the speaker's own negative judgments, some of her feelings of uniqueness, some of the isolation.

As the writer's attention is divided between her story and her writing, and as she is distracted by the demands of her craft, her story becomes less unspeakable. When the writer hears her story echoed back to her, she begins to see it for what it truly is -- something which happened <u>to</u> her, not something which <u>is</u> her. While it may appear minor at first glance, that distinction is profound.

Jackie brought the following poem to one of our more recent meetings:

There is a bond developing
Flying around the circle that we have created.
Please hold on so we don't lose one another.
For me there is no beginning,
For you there is no end.

This magical carpet ride has just begun.
Let us glide until it is all done.

As Jackie read this poem, I assumed it was another piece about our WIN group. One part of the magic which makes the group work is the "circle that we have created." Ours is a circle of safety within which members can sense the "bond developing." As with any circle, "there is no beginning," "there is no end." It is a circle within which we "hold on so we don't lose one another." In many ways, it <u>is</u> a "magical carpet ride."

I was reminded how important it is to assume nothing when Jackie informed us that the poem was actually about a new love interest in her life.

A social worker, through a helping relationship, strives to empower the client, to increase that individual's ability to produce and regulate events in her own life. One way to do this is to heighten self-knowledge which gives the individual more control over her life situation and which decreases self-blame, a behavior often associated with feelings of immobilization. The high level of control inherent in the writing process makes writing an excellent medium through which to attain these goals.

The non-structured, non-academic group format of WIN allows individual members to give as well as to receive. The fluid

movement of each member between the roles of supplicant and helper is a significant part of the dynamic of WIN as it creates an empowering atmosphere of mutual aid.

The Emerging Writer

Terry Smith

Jackie came to the WIN group thinking of herself as a "woman who writes." For many years, she used journal writing as a way to "work through problems." She did not, however, craft her writing. The experience of sharing writing with an audience and having that audience respond led her to some surprising discoveries about writing and the writing process. When Jackie says that she is amazed that she has a voice, we realize that alone, she is unable to hear it. She needs an audience to point out to her what she cannot hear for herself -- she has a distinctive voice, one that gives her writing individuality and energy. Her voice is so strong that her writing is often filled with emotion -- so much so, that occasionally she seems somewhat overwhelmed. In November, she writes:

The Dam

If I let it flow
will it ever stop?
I feel that I can fill fields...

If I let it flow
will it ever stop?
The feelings just
keep coming.
When will they
ever stop...

It is at this point, she describes her writing as a "once in a lifetime experience." The words and emotions flow onto the page uncensored and unaltered. She has not yet learned how to gain the distance and control that will enable her to craft her writing.

During the month of November, Jackie is plunged into a personal crisis. Her mother, who is mentally ill, has been diagnosed with cancer. Jackie experiences a number of conflicting emotions. She has repeatedly referred to her mother as her "child" in her writing. It is clear that Jackie has held the caretaker role in this relationship for many years. Her writing becomes intensely personal as she tries to work out on the page her feelings of guilt, fear, and loss. She writes:

The pressure of the days keeps pushing me on
Feeling the weight of the problems
Knowing what is being forced, and I'm needing
To deal at my own pace.

In December, Jackie experiences writer's block. She is exhausted by the demands of her first semester as a returning student and the responsibilities of caring for an ailing mother. The rest of the group is feeling stressed as well because of final exams, jobs, families, and general exhaustion. We decide to hold only one meeting in December and make plans to meet twice during the January break.

At the two January meetings, Jackie expresses her frustration with writing. On January sixteenth, she writes:

> I have lost my desire to write. I have been writing for years off and on. It seems to come and go for me -- the time when I need to do it the most is when I can't get it out at all.

Significantly, Jackie overcomes her writer's block by writing about the experience of not being able to write. She subsequently produces several pieces of writing in January including three poems and four essays.

Still, she is unable to craft her writing -- unable to impose order on her ideas. Her inability to craft seems related to how she views her role as a student in a college classroom. During the fall semester, she found herself in classes where lecturing is the primary method of instruction, and student passivity is the norm.

In addition, these same instructors imposed an academic structure on her writing which made her feel uncomfortable. Consequently, Jackie had a difficult time negotiating her role as a student. She writes in the fall that school "feels more like what is happening to me than what I am participating in." In the spring semester, however, Jackie's circumstances change considerably.

Two important things occur early in the spring semester. First, Jackie finds herself in a literature class in which participation and discussion are encouraged. Second, she decides to submit some poems for publication.

During the February tenth meeting, Jackie relates how a two and a half hour discussion in her literature class about poems and their meanings inspired her to sit down at her computer and start writing. In one of these pieces, she writes:

> My life still goes on
> Sometimes I feel a part of it
> Conducting the whole show
> Other times I feel like I'm being
> Taken down this long path of darkness
> And only occasionally do I wake up and see the light...
> Realizing that it is still me that all this is
> Happening to and I better start participating more

or

It will simply slip away before my very eyes.

Jackie makes a crucial discovery here -- she is acknowledging that she must take an active role in her life. It is important to note that this realization occurs following a class in which active participation is encouraged. When given an opportunity to speak, to participate actively in her own learning process, Jackie discovers a sense of empowerment, a sense of control. Once she is able to feel some control in the classroom, she starts to exercise some control over her writing -- she begins to craft.

During this same February tenth meeting, Jackie brings in some poems that she would like to submit for publication - the same poems that she wrote following the discussion in literature class. The fact that she wants to submit the poems for publication is important -- she is now consciously writing for an audience and, consequently, she changes her writing process.

She no longer sees the first draft as the final product. She calls the poems "little things" that just came out. She brings the writing to the group with the intention of revising, something she has never done before. She also states that "another weird thing that happened" was she wrote a title first and then the poem. This is a clear departure from her former writing process, and it suggests that she is becoming more adept at finding and refining a

focus.

Jackie revises her "little poems" during the meeting. She begins by reading them aloud, and everyone, including Jackie, realizes that they are connected. She takes two of the fragments and blends them together to make one poem while the group acts as a responsive audience. Interestingly, one of the other poems is a revision of a piece she wrote months ago, early in the life of the group. She is learning that language is mutable -- her words are no longer written in stone. On February fifteenth, she writes:

> These feelings that stir inside are the ones that I am finally able to express through written words. Being a part of this writing group, the validation and support of this group, has shown me that I am a writer. I realized I can share my experience through words and enlighten other people as to what my life is like.

Clearly, Jackie has taken several steps during the months of her WIN membership. She has discovered that she has a voice, and she can now recognize and refine that voice. She has discovered that putting words on the page is the beginning, not the end, of the writing process. She has moved from journal writing for an audience of one, to writing for a supportive group, to writing for a public audience. And she has gained confidence and control in her

academic life both orally and rhetorically.

CONCLUSIONS

Although we've concentrated on one writer's progress, we found that in this safe place without grades or hierarchy, in this safe place constituted by a group of trusted peers, all the group members flourished. As each writer receives nonjudgmental responses from the group, she makes some initial moves to relinquish the "I only-write-it-once" stance and to view writing as crafted, as a result of a number of influences, collaborations. There is also a concomitant development of the self in relation to intellectual growth, voice, and empowerment. The progress is slow, and certainly it isn't linear. But we do see the writers move from what, in Women's Ways of Knowing, Belenky et al. describe as subjective knowing ("the conviction that the most trustworthy knowledge comes from personal experience rather than the pronouncement of authorities") to what they call "connected knowing" (112-113), an important step for students who are entering the world of academic discourse. The authors write, "Connected knowers develop procedures for gaining access to other people's knowledge. At the heart of these procedures is the capacity for empathy. Since knowledge comes from experience, the only way they can hope to understand another person's ideas is to try to share the experience that has led the person to form the idea" (113).

By the seventh week, it is clear that the group has truly become a community of writers - connected knowers - and that their conversation is not only about content, it is about voice, organization, imagery, and metaphor. The group has taken on the flavor of that often-cited Burkean parlor. The conversation has begun; there is clear evidence of the benefits of the social constructionist model of learning. Inexperienced writers are learning from the more experienced and vice versa. Smith and Santos have modeled the writing process and strategies the other writers might use. Everyone has written; everyone has received responses. The writing is never divorced from content, and responses are always given with a powerful combination of respect and humor. As early as this seventh week, we see that the group has become a discourse community in its own right, with one conversation stimulating another related conversation - there is a context.

During this meeting, Santos writes an essay entitled "Undying Faith" and prefaces her reading of it by saying, "It never ceases to amaze me how all of this ties in." She speaks to Smith and says, "Your writing last week was in response to something Maria had written. My writing of this week ties into the whole group." After Santos reads, the whole group responds with examples of similar experiences - fertile ground for future writing.

In "Kitchen Tables and Rented Rooms: The Extracurriculum of Composition," Anne Ruggles Gere allowed us to see how workshops outside classrooms often accomplish what composition teachers hope

(but often fail) to achieve inside classrooms. Participants in such groups develop positive feelings about themselves, become motivated to revise and to improve their writing, and come to know that writing can make a difference in their lives. Gere describes these self-sponsored groups as "constructed by desire" (80). In establishing the WIN group, we have hoped that we might create a liminal space, sponsored by the college but not constrained by its disciplines, connecting the worlds inside and outside the academy.

Belenky, Mary Field, et al. Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind. New York: Basic Books, 1986.

Gere, Anne Ruggles. "Kitchen Tables and Rented Rooms: The Extracurriculum of Composition." CCC 45 (1994): 75-92.